

Evaluating the US Counter-ISIL Strategy

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

Evaluating the US Counter-ISIL Strategy, by LTC Jason A. Curl, US Army, 42 pages.

Although ISIL is not an existential threat to the United States or its allies, it will continue to inflict many casualties world-wide and commit uncountable atrocities in Iraq and Syria. The current US strategy is putting pressure on ISIL militarily and economically but it will take a long time. The sixty-two nation coalition has already arrested ISIL's expansion and allowed the Iraqi Security Forces to gain back ground. The coalition's operations will continue to erode ISIL's finances, legitimacy, and aspirations of becoming an actual state. The most significant obstacle that the United States faces in this conflict is the lack of governance in Syria to provide for the people. Until this exists, ISIL or another similar group, will always have a following. Also, efforts to paint ISIL as not Islamic are problematic because their leader has a PhD in Islamic studies and they use media very effectively to show the religious legitimacy of their actions. Finally, efforts to prevent the flow of ISIL supporters into Syria and Iraq could cause more attacks at home.

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Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
CIFG	Counter-ISIL Finance Group
CTF	Counterterrorism Force
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DoD	Department of Defense
DoJ	Department of Justice
DoS	Department of State
DoT	Department of Treasury
EU	European Union
HMMWV	High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee)
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
LOE	Line of Effort
MNFI	Multinational Forces Iraq
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SFA	Security Force Assistance
TAA	Train, Advise, and Assist
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
YPG	Yekineyen Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

Introduction

Many threats face the United States and its allies, most notably Russia, China, Democratic Republic of Korea, Iran, and international terrorist organizations, mainly the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Unlike the first four, ISIL is likely not an existential threat that could threaten the existence of the United States but it is still a threat that the United States cannot ignore, for many reasons. It has and will continue to inflict many casualties on innocent civilians in the United States and the homelands of its closest allies. Sixty million people have fled ISIL controlled territories, the most ever recorded by the United Nations.¹ The atrocities committed by both the Assad regime in Syria and ISIL make it a situation that responsible nations cannot ignore. Since 2012, ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has made consistent direct threats against the United States and its allies.² As of October 2015, over twenty thousand foreigners had moved to the Levant to fight for ISIL, most significantly 1,200 from France, 1,500 from Russia, 600 each from the United Kingdom and Germany, and 500 from Pakistan.³ Finally, ISIL - or those trying to impress it - carried out attacks in Paris, Brussels, Orlando, San Bernardino, and New York and are not likely to stop any time soon.

To answer this threat, the US Government has a comprehensive whole-of-government strategy using nine lines of effort (LOEs), incorporating all elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic). LOE 1 is supporting effective governance in Iraq. LOE 2 is to deny ISIL safe-haven. LOE 3 is to build partner capacity. LOE 4 is enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL. LOE 5 is disrupting ISIL's finances. LOE 6 is exposing ISIL's true nature. LOE

¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *ISIS and the "Failed States Wars"* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015), 17.

² Kenneth Katzman, Christopher M. Blanchard, Clara E. Humud, Rhoda Margesson, and Alex Tiersky, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 2.

³ Cordesman, 48.

7 is disrupting the flow of foreign fighters. LOE 8 is protecting the homeland. Finally, LOE 9 is to provide humanitarian support. Although there are nine, the Obama administration emphasizes only five in both speeches and money spent in the following priority: LOE 2 (Deny ISIL safe-haven), followed by LOE 1 (Supporting effective governance in Iraq), LOE 3 (Build partner capacity), LOE 5 (Disrupting ISIL's finances), and LOE 7 (Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters).

This strategy could be successful, if it continues to adjust to the realities of the current situation. Using a large US ground force could tactically defeat ISIL forces but it would play right into their information operations, prevent long-term stability after the coalition leaves, cost a prohibitive amount of money, and leave the United States unprepared for the threats that could actually challenge its national existence. Although it will be long and painful, the United States and its allies must continue to degrade this threat through air-strikes, partnered force ground operations, Special Operations, diplomacy, and economic measures. This will allow time for ISIL to burn itself out as an ideology suited for long-term sustainability.

In assessing this US strategy against ISIL, the bottom line is that it is the best of many bad options. Although this strategy should work over time, there are some inherent problems that policy makers must address. First, no world power or coalition of world powers can defeat ISIL without stable inclusive governments in both Iraq and Syria.⁴ Although Iraq has made improvements, it still does not fully meet the needs of its Sunni Arabs or Kurds. Syria is not even close. Second, defeating ISIL's messaging by labeling them as "non-Islamic" is problematic given Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's very strong religious credentials, including a PhD in Islamic Studies.⁵ Third, halting the flow of foreign fighters into the region could actually cause more attacks at home. Those who want

⁴ Muhammad al-Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton, and Bryan Price, *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State* (West Point: The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2014), 97.

⁵ William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 137.

to contribute to ISIL's fight but cannot get to Syria, must carry out jihad in the home territories of the counter-ISIL coalition.⁶

This paper assesses the US strategy for defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant by studying ISIL's history, ideology, desired goals, and current methods, as well as their critical capabilities and vulnerabilities. It then looks at how well the US strategy is actually addressing those critical capabilities and vulnerabilities. Finally, it explores alternative, whole-of-government strategies that the United States could use. This paper is limited to the strategy of the Barak Obama administration as it is too early to assess the changes made by the Donald Trump administration, other than a limited assessment from speeches and the backgrounds of his advisors.

Study of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

Brief History of ISIL Origins

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was born out of al Qaeda and the war in Iraq. After the United States overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian small-time criminal turned terrorist, became the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) but always differed ideologically from Osama Bin Laden. His desire for an Islamic Caliphate and willingness to kill fellow Sunni Muslims put the two constantly at odds.⁷ Bin Laden and his al Qaeda successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, never bought into Zarqawi's philosophy. This ultimately led to a final split between the two groups in 2014.⁸ When US airstrikes killed Zarqawi in 2006, Abu 'Umar and Abu Hamza succeeded him as the leaders of AQI. These leaders first declared that AQI was an actual state in 2008 around the time that they brought in the current leader, Abu Bakr al-

⁶ Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 94.

⁷ McCants, 15.

⁸ Ibid, 93.

Baghdadi.⁹ In late 2014, ISIL officially split with al Nusra (the al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq and Syria) because of the differences in their goals and ideologies.¹⁰

The ascension of ISIL, its eventual break with al Qaeda, and proclamation as a global caliphate was largely possible because Baghdadi was able to spread his ideology and build a coalition during his time in a Multinational Forces Iraq (MNF-I) prison at Camp Bucca.¹¹ Baghdadi grew up in Samarra, Iraq as Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Sammarrai.¹² He led a quiet life until the 2003 war in Iraq, when he started on his path toward jihad. In late 2004 or early 2005, he was arrested and sent to Camp Bucca.¹³ Camp Bucca had developed the nickname “The Academy” because jihadi organizations recruited and trained so many fighters there.¹⁴ After his release, Baghdadi earned his PhD in Islamic Studies from Baghdad University and changed his name to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁵ He then became the leader of the Islamic State in May 2010 when a coalition airstrike killed Umar and Hamza. The group had been looking for a charismatic leader with expert knowledge of Islam.¹⁶ ISIL then replaced many al Qaeda leaders with former Saddam Hussein Ba’athists, including Abu Muslim al-Turkmani and Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, who Baghdadi had lived with at Camp Bucca. This gave ISIL the administrative skills needed to run a state.¹⁷ All of these plans seemed to come to fruition in May 2014 when Baghdadi gave a sermon at the Mosul mosque,

⁹ al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, and Price, 15.

¹⁰ Stern and Berger, 43.

¹¹ Ibid, 35.

¹² Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), 44.

¹³ Stern and Berger, 34.

¹⁴ McCants, 75.

¹⁵ Ibid, 76.

¹⁶ Stern and Berger, 37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 38.

announcing that the group's name had become just "The Islamic State," that it was now a global caliphate, and followers should address him as Caliph Ibrahim.¹⁸

ISIL started to actually look like a state or a global caliphate. They used the space created by a sectarian regime in Iraq and a failed state in Syria to build a following.¹⁹ When US forces left Iraq in 2011, the government became unable to function because the United States was so ingrained in all of its governmental processes.²⁰ Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had spent twenty years in political exile by the Saddam Hussein Sunni sectarian regime. During this time, he built up years of contempt and mistrust for Sunnis. He used the US departure as an opportunity to crush the Sunni Awakening movement.²¹ This left Iraqi Sunni Arabs with no one to champion their needs and no voice in the government.²² The timing of these events in Iraq coincided closely with exposure of the Assad regime's brutality and atrocities, including the dismembering of a thirteen-year-old boy.²³ ISIL was able to move into Syria and provide a counterforce to the Assad regime. They then consolidated their forces in the city of Raqqa after their 2014 split with al Nusra.

In addition to the lack of effective governance in Iraq and Syria, another contributing factor to the support for ISIL is the increasing Sunni/Shia divide in the Middle East.²⁴ Saudi Arabia and Iran have been using Syria as a Sunni vs. Shia proxy war to destroy one another's credibility instead of working toward a solution.²⁵ In fact, most of the gulf states have been reluctant to give

¹⁸ Stern and Berger, 46.

¹⁹ Stephen Wicken, *Middle East Security Report II: Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2013), 21.

²⁰ Stern and Berger, 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Wicken, 7.

²³ Stern and Berger, 41.

²⁴ Azeem Ibrahim, *The Resurgence of Al-Qaeda in Syria and Iraq* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2014), 2.

²⁵ Brian Katulis, "Assessing the Anti-ISIS Campaign After the First Year," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (October 1, 2015): 37, Congressional Testimony, accessed July 20, 2016,

their full support to the counter-ISIL fight because they see Iran as the major threat in the region. They believe that defeating ISIL will only embolden the Assad regime and its Iranian sponsors. Only once they successfully defeat the threat posed by Shia Iran will they be willing to give their full support to the fight against ISIL.²⁶

ISIL Ideology

To defeat ISIL, leaders need to understand their grievances, which go back well before Operation Iraqi Freedom, or even Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. The First World War ended with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Although there is some controversy over whether the Ottomans were a legitimate caliphate, many Muslim leaders believe that with its fall, they lost their voice on the world stage.²⁷ This insult increased, in the minds of current ISIL leaders and their followers, with the Sykes-Picot Agreement which arbitrarily carved up Sunni Arab lands to meet British and French colonial needs.²⁸ These events led to a rise in Wahhabism, originating in Saudi Arabia. This is a very strict form of Sunni Islam focused on Sharia Law.²⁹ Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and the subsequent Western presence in the Middle East further exacerbated these grievances.³⁰ Al Qaeda was able to capitalize on this confluence of anger, humiliation, and rejection of modernity to begin their terror movement. The power vacuums in both Iraq and Syria have allowed ISIL to turn this movement into the beginnings of an actual state. The poverty and

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1721190406?accountid=28992>.

²⁶ Daniel Benjamin, "US Counterterrorism Efforts in Syria: A Winning Strategy?," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (October 1, 2015): 51, Congressional Testimony, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1721190356?accountid=28992>.

²⁷ McCants, 124.

²⁸ "The World Has Divided into Two Camps," *Dabiq, Issue 1, The Return of Khalifah* (AH 1435 Ramadan): 13.

²⁹ Cockburn, 6.

³⁰ Andrew Tan, *U.S. Strategy Against Global Terrorism: How It Evolved, Why It Failed, and Where It is Headed* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 123.

oppression throughout the majority of the Muslim world has then allowed its rapid spread to provinces throughout the Middle East and Africa.³¹

Once the anger, humiliation, and ineffective governments allowed ISIL to take root, they used a combination of sensational violence and visions of a utopian society to gain popular support. Their offensive operation began in 2013 with the successful attack on Abu Ghraib Prison and other Iraqi Shia prisons freeing hundreds of Sunni leaders and fighters.³² Once they started seizing land, they sought to provide better land rights, food supply, industry, banks, schools, health care, and social services.³³ To accomplish this, they have relied heavily on the administrative skills of the former Saddam Ba'athists. They have also been very good at human resource management, putting foreigners to work immediately upon their arrival using each one's unique skills.³⁴ Because of their extreme ideology and administrative skills, franchised Provinces (or Wilayats) are turning up throughout the Middle East and Africa. They will not give Wilayat status to any groups until they demonstrate the requisite administrative skills.³⁵

ISIL does not believe that everyone deserves their utopian society. In fact, they believe that there are two houses, the house of Islam and the house of war.³⁶ All non-Muslim areas of the world must live in constant struggle (jihad) or war so that they will eventually convert to Islam.³⁷ ISIL's goal has never been to "win hearts and minds." They want to horrify people, like the Mongols or

³¹ Tom H. Hastings, *Nonviolent Response to Terrorism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2004), 3.

³² Cockburn, 46.

³³ Stern and Berger, 73.

³⁴ al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, and Price, 75.

³⁵ Stern and Berger, 186.

³⁶ "The World Has Divided into Two Camps," *Dabiq, Issue 1, The Return of Khilafah* (AH 1435 Ramadan): 13.

³⁷ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 15, Break the Cross* (AH 1437 Shawwal): 7.

French Revolutionaries did.³⁸ Their goal is to desensitize the world to violence by publicly broadcasting murder, rape, and terror and show the futility of resistance.³⁹

They articulated their overall guidance to all followers in issue 2 of *Dabiq* magazine. Followers must first seek to join the fight in Syria. If they cannot do that, they must carry out attacks at home. If that is not possible either, they must simply believe in the cause.⁴⁰

ISIL Endstates (Regional and Global)

ISIL's overall endstate goal is to become a global caliphate with all of the world converted to Islam. These goals are very different from Al Qaeda's because ISIL is authoritarian, rules based, structured, controlling territory, and wishing to expand.⁴¹ In *Dabiq* magazine, they articulated this sentiment saying, "Allah and his messenger said that Islam will rule over all of the Earth."⁴² ISIL is carrying out this edict by expanding into the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, Sinai Peninsula, Libya, and Algeria. They believe that Muslims and non-believers can never be and should never be friends and that pure Islamic belief and nationalism can never coexist.⁴³ This means that no legal system other than Sharia is legitimate because, "As it is said in all Semitic languages from Adam to Muhammed, there is no God but God, and only he can judge."⁴⁴ These are the reasons why ISIL could never accept a world where there are other forms of government and ideologies. They must continue to expand until they either take over the world in global jihad or destroy themselves trying.

³⁸ McCants, 148.

³⁹ Stern and Berger, 208.

⁴⁰ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 2, The Flood* (AH 1435 Ramadan): 3.

⁴¹ Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic* (March 2015): 3.

⁴² "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 5, Remaining and Expanding* (AH 1436 Muharram): 3.

⁴³ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 8, Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa* (AH 1436 Jumada al-Akhirah): 4.

⁴⁴ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 15, Break the Cross* (AH 1437 Shawwal): 6.

In addition to ridding the world of all non-Muslims, they seek to defeat apostate Muslim regimes, non-Sharia abiding Muslims, and all Shias.⁴⁵ The first step is to defeat their near enemies. They see the oppressive and dysfunctional Shia regimes in Syria and Iraq as easy targets since they are very unpopular and fail to provide basic services to their people, especially their Sunni populations.⁴⁶ Next, they seek to defeat what they see as apostate Sunni governments in places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.⁴⁷ In fact they say that, “The sword will fall against the hypocrites before it falls against the Infidels.”⁴⁸ They are especially hostile toward the Saudi government because it turns people against Sharia Law by enforcing extremely strict rules without providing any of the social or economic benefits that should accompany Sharia.⁴⁹

Once they defeat all apostate Muslim regimes, ISIL seeks to rid the world of all non-Muslims. They have kidnapped, enslaved, and sexually assaulted 2,500 children from Yazidi and Christian neighborhoods.⁵⁰ To defend this, they reference a Quranic verse that explicitly tells them that sex slaves are justified because the Prophet foretold that, “The hour (of judgement) would be close when the slave girl shall give birth to her master.”⁵¹ This is part of ISIL’s philosophy that the return of Mahdi, “guided one,” is near and they need to prepare for the final battle against the nonbelievers.⁵²

This ultimate battle is ISIL’s final goal. They will lure “Rome” (United States, Russia, United Kingdom, France, etc.) into a final battle in the city of Dabiq, in northern Syria, that will

⁴⁵ “Forward,” *Dabiq, Issue 12, Just* (AH 1437 Safar): 3.

⁴⁶ McCants, 126.

⁴⁷ “Forward,” *Dabiq, Issue 11, From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions* (AH 1436 Dhul-Qa’dah): 4.

⁴⁸ McCants, 109.

⁴⁹ Wood, 22.

⁵⁰ Stern and Berger, 215.

⁵¹ McCants, 112.

⁵² *Ibid*, 105.

eventually lead to the end of the world.⁵³ The cover of every *Dabiq* magazine shows a quote from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi saying, “The spark has been lit here in Iraq and its heat will continue to intensify, by Allah’s permission, until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.”⁵⁴ The ISIL leadership says in Issue 4 of *Dabiq* magazine that it will destroy “Rome” and the Whitehouse and establish a state from Spain to China, just as President Bush predicted.⁵⁵ They have shaped their information operations for this final battle by framing all struggles with the West as crusader attempts to destroy Islam.⁵⁶ ISIL believes that once they fight the “Roman” Army in Dabiq, they will then sack Istanbul, and continue to spread to the rest of the Middle East. Eventually an Army from Khorasan (eastern Iran) will push them back to Jerusalem. There Jesus will come down, shatter the cross, and kill the anti-Christ, a one-eyed Jew. He will save the last five-hundred true believers just before the end of the world.⁵⁷

Ways ISIL Seeks to Achieve Endstates

ISIL has made a call for all true believers to come to Syria and Iraq to join the cause. The first way they have made this call is through print media. They publish *Dabiq* magazine every quarter. This is an extremely professional 50-80-page magazine describing exactly what they expect from their followers, praising the heroic acts of their jihadists, warning their enemies, and announcing their strategic aims.

They have also become masters of social media. They primarily use Twitter because of its strict adherence to free speech.⁵⁸ Millions of people see ISIL’s messages every time they turn on

⁵³ McCants, 105.

⁵⁴ *Dabiq*.

⁵⁵ “Forward,” *Dabiq, Issue 4, The Failed Crusade* (AH 1435 Dhul-Hijjah): 4.

⁵⁶ Stern and Burger, 249.

⁵⁷ Wood, 27

⁵⁸ Stern and Berger, 134.

their phones. During the 2014 World Cup Soccer Tournament, all Twitter users got ISIL propaganda when they searched for scores on their phones.⁵⁹ When ISIL invaded Mosul, it sent out 40,000 Tweets a day.⁶⁰ They also use social and print media and online publications to explain how all of their actions are in strict adherence to the Quran.⁶¹

Using their social media expertise, they aggressively reach out to prospective followers from all backgrounds. While they are extremely intolerant of anyone who does not believe in their prohibitively strict version of Islam, they still seek followers from all backgrounds and ethnicities.⁶² In the first issue of *Dabiq*, they say that the Caliph welcomes all people, of all countries, and all races to ISIL.⁶³ Of the over 20,000 fighters who had joined ISIL by October 2015, over 3,000 were from Europe, North America, and Australia.⁶⁴ One of the most influential spokesmen for ISIL has been a white Australian named Musa Cerantonio.⁶⁵ In fact, one of the most difficult problems encountered by those fighting ISIL is the support that they receive from all over the world: Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.⁶⁶

In addition to their recruitment from all ethnic groups, they have aggressively recruited females. Al Khanza'a is a female recruiting movement headed by Aqsa Mahmood, who left a very secular family in Glasgow, Scotland to marry a fighter and contribute to the ISIL cause in any way she could.⁶⁷ ISIL has been very proactive in using these groups to recruit females because they

⁵⁹ Stern and Berger, 147.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 157.

⁶¹ Wood, 13

⁶² Stern and Berger, 77.

⁶³ "Khilafah Declared," *Dabiq, Issue 1, The Return of Khilafah* (1435 Ramadan): 7.

⁶⁴ Cordesman, 48.

⁶⁵ Wood, 15.

⁶⁶ Cockburn, 42.

⁶⁷ Stern and Burger, 89.

realize they must grow a new generation if they have any hope of building a complete society.⁶⁸ Although lots of women have initially come to Syria excited to make a difference in ISIL, many have tried to leave after seeing the horrors. Still, their efforts to recruit females and fighters from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia have been much more successful than Al Qaeda could have ever hoped for.⁶⁹

As noted previously, if true believers cannot move to Syria to join the fight, they are called on to conduct attacks at home. On September 22, 2014, ISIL's chief spokesman, Abu Muhammed al-Adnani, called all Muslims to kill as many Europeans as possible.⁷⁰ Since then, most world-wide terrorist attacks have been homegrown, like the ones in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, and Orlando.⁷¹ In fact, many Europeans went to Syria to kill Assad but then ISIL trained them in weapons and sent them back to Europe to conduct attacks at home. An example was Mehdi Nennouche, the man who killed four people in a Jewish museum in Brussels. He returned to Belgium through Frankfurt and overland from Frankfurt to Brussels to conduct the attack.⁷²

Dabiq magazine actually devotes large portions of each issue to praising those who have carried out attacks against their homelands. Issue 13 praised the San Bernardino terrorists saying that nothing could be more gratifying than a husband and wife defending the Caliph together despite having a baby to take care of.⁷³ In Issue 6, they praised an Australian Muslim in Sydney who killed two people in a café and wounded four, including a police officer. The writer said that

⁶⁸ Wood, 15.

⁶⁹ Stern and Berger, 97.

⁷⁰ Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times* (March 29, 2016).

⁷¹ Ibid, 94.

⁷² Callimachi.

⁷³ "Forward," *Dabiq*, Issue 13, *The Rafidah from Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal* (AH 1437 Rabi al-Akhir): 3.

he achieved greatness by bringing fear and terror to an entire nation.⁷⁴ Also, Issue 15 praised the attacks in Orlando, Dhaka, Magnanville, Nice, and Normandy which killed 600 people, while costing only twelve terrorists. The writer explained that these victims should have submitted to Islam but instead bowed to democracy and secularism.⁷⁵

As alluded to earlier, a large part of ISIL's strategy is to combine these horrific acts with visions of a utopian society. They have used their outstanding recruiting methods to call on anyone with the skills - such as teachers, doctors, engineers, or anything else needed to build their utopian society.⁷⁶ They describe their vision of a very harsh, rules-based society which combines fixing potholes, running post-offices, and providing food and polio vaccines with strict punishments.⁷⁷ ISIL actually uses beheadings and other atrocities as a form of marketing and manipulation to determine who has the stomach to receive these benefits.⁷⁸ The incompetent and oppressive regimes Syria and Iraq have significantly aided in getting followers to buy into ISIL's visions of a perfect society.⁷⁹

ISIL's Critical Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

ISIL's critical capabilities are their ability to recruit, their ability to clear and hold land, and their perceived ability to provide essential services to their people better than the current or recent governments of Syria and Iraq. Of these, recruiting is their most significant capability. Issue 3 of *Dabiq* magazine boasts, "Never before in the history of the world has there been a state where so many people from different cultures and languages have come to follow a man they do not even

⁷⁴ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 6, Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony From Within* (AH 1436 Rabi' al-Awwal): 4.

⁷⁵ "Forward," *Dabiq, Issue 15, Break the Cross* (AH 1437 Shawwal): 4.

⁷⁶ Stern and Berger, 74.

⁷⁷ McCants, 152.

⁷⁸ Stern and Berger, 3.

⁷⁹ McCants, 126.

know.”⁸⁰ Their use of all forms of media to reach out to Muslims worldwide and motivate them to either leave their homes and come to Syria or conduct attacks at home is unprecedented. The fact that the United States and the international community does not recognize ISIL is actually good for them. Recognition by democratic, secular, and non-Muslim governments would damage their message.⁸¹

A large portion of their recruiting comes from their ability to portray the vision of a better life with ISIL than with any other form of government in Iraq or Syria, as well as in Europe, North America, or Australia. Although still very imperfect, they have shown that their ability, or at the very least motivation, to govern occupied territories and provide for the needs of the Sunni Muslims is far better than the current Syrian or Iraqi governments. Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledges that no strategy against ISIL will work without an inclusive government in Iraq.⁸² By casting the current fight as the nation of Islam against Rome, Christians, Westerners, or Americans, Europeans, and Australians, they are able to drive a wedge between Muslims and the countries where their followers live. This continues to motivate those sympathetic to their cause to join the jihad.

In addition to recruiting, their ability to clear and hold terrain is a critical capability. They have demonstrated the ability to fight conventionally to seize terrain. This is unlike any other terrorist organizations, except arguably Hezbollah. Military equipment such as tanks, HMMWVs, and howitzers that they acquired when Iraqi forces fled their attacks have greatly contributed to their military strength.⁸³ Their successful use of the information element of national power has also

⁸⁰ “The Islamic State Before Al-Malhammah,” *Dabiq, Issue 3, A Call to Hijrah* (AH 1435 Shawwal): 5.

⁸¹ al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, and Price, 18.

⁸² John Kerry, “US Strategy on Syria, Iraq, and ISIL,” *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (October 1, 2015): 29, Congressional Testimony, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1721190276?accountid=28992>.

⁸³ Jay Sekulow, *Rise of ISIS: A Threat We Can’t Ignore* (New York: Howard Books, 2014), 41.

been critical in these operations. When they went into Mosul, many people saw them as liberators instead of invaders because of their information preparation using all forms of media.⁸⁴

Their final critical capability is their ability to provide for the needs of the people, at least Sunni people, better than the current governments in Syria and Iraq. The strategy they use in Syria is much different from their strategy in Iraq. In Syria, they use a “Direct Competition Strategy.” This is competition for the minds of the people with the Assad government, Al Nusra, and various secular groups using technology and brutal force to recruit.⁸⁵ Their strategy in Iraq is a more indirect approach, weakening the government in Baghdad through sectarian Shia/Sunni violence.⁸⁶ Through the administrative skills that they have gained from former Ba’athists and the pretenses they have made about building schools, health clinics, roads, and government institutions, they have given the people some hope that their lives could be better. Outside of Iraq and Syria, people who have seen ISIL’s messaging about improving lives, have sought to become part of the franchise.⁸⁷

These critical capabilities feed almost directly into their critical vulnerabilities. ISIL’s most critical vulnerabilities are its severe brutality and inflexible principals. These practices will make the state hard to sustain over time. In fact, many foreign fighters have become disillusioned with ISIL’s brutality and have tried to leave.⁸⁸ The atrocities they have committed against Sunni Muslims are starting to gain attention. In August 2015, other jihadist organizations expressed outrage on social media over ISIL massacring hundreds of Sunni tribesmen in Northern Iraq.⁸⁹ Muslims are also outraged because ISIL has threatened to destroy the Kaaba in Mecca’s Grand

⁸⁴ McCants, 124.

⁸⁵ Ross Harrison, “Toward a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS,” *Parameters* 44.3 (Autumn 2014):37.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ McCants, 141.

⁸⁸ Stern and Berger, 98.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 251.

Mosque because, “People go to Mecca to touch the stones, not for Allah.”⁹⁰ They run into dangerous ground with other Sunni Muslim groups when they declare Sunni Muslims takfir (not a genuine believer). Falsely accusing someone of this is punishable by death.⁹¹ Despite their outward disdain for all other groups, they have actually become frustrated that more Muslims, particularly Al Qaeda and Taliban, will not join their movement.⁹² Finally, their extremely Sunni nature makes it difficult for ISIL to make any inroads into central or southern Iraq, hurting their ability to seize any more terrain.⁹³

In addition to their severe brutality and inflexibility, ISIL’s finances are becoming a considerable vulnerability. Money will become harder to come by as it becomes harder for ISIL to seize land and expand. Money stolen from banks, U.S. military equipment, and ransom (war loot) have become their second largest form of revenue.⁹⁴ ISIL’s funding in 2014 was \$600 million from extortion and taxation in Iraq, \$500 million stolen from Iraqi banks, \$100 million from oil, and \$20 million from kidnapping and ransom.⁹⁵ The oil fields that they have seized represent another significant portion of their income. These fields have been largely neglected and unless ISIL puts a significant emphasis on running them, their revenues will start decreasing significantly. A fifty percent decrease in oil prices over the past three years has also had a detrimental effect on ISIL’s finances. Fissures with Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups could also hurt their brand appeal and trim the amount of outside donor financial support they receive.

Another vulnerability for ISIL has been their problems providing the essential services that they have advertised. These services have proven much more difficult to provide than their leaders

⁹⁰ Sekulow, 38.

⁹¹ Wood, 8.

⁹² Stern and Berger, 118.

⁹³ al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, and Price, 40.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 65.

⁹⁵ Cordesman, 39.

expected. Because of the pressure the coalition is putting on them, it has become difficult to actually provide the food, health-care, and other essential services that they promised. This has alienated many followers.⁹⁶ Food and energy prices have also put a significant strain on ISIL's finite financial resources in their occupied territories.⁹⁷ These troubles are more acute because much of the excitement about ISIL was its combination of harsh brutality combined with its focus on food, roads, healthcare, and education. They have billed themselves as the perfect utopian Islamic society for all true believers. If they prove unable to provide for their people any better than the governments of Syria and Iraq or the governments where their affiliate Wilayats are located, they lose significant credibility.

Their final vulnerability is actually in being a state at all. As a state, they are more vulnerable than they would be as a terrorist or insurgent group.⁹⁸ Counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are difficult because the enemy can blend into the population and the counterinsurgent force cannot find them.⁹⁹ ISIL becoming an actual state, as they have somewhat successfully attempted, exposes them to conventional military attacks, financial attacks by the international monetary community, and information attacks on their inability to provide for the needs of their people. These make them easier for developed countries and the international community to defeat.

⁹⁶ McCants, 136.

⁹⁷ al-Ubaydi, Lahoud, Milton, and Price, 72.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁹ Michael T. Boyle, "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?" *International Affairs* 86 (March 29, 2016): 344.

Current US Strategy to Defeat ISIL

Desired Endstate Against ISIL

The United States' primary concern is to prevent foreign fighters from the United States and its allies returning to their home countries and conducting attacks.¹⁰⁰ ISIL is not an existential threat to the United States or any of its allies. They do not have the capability to overthrow a large first world government. If left unchecked though, they will continue to inspire terrorist attacks throughout the world that could kill thousands of people. If this strategy achieves nothing else, it needs to prevent as many attacks as possible against the homeland of the United States and its allies. All else is secondary.

Speeches from senior leaders and government documents have made this endstate confusing for subordinate leaders to focus on. In speeches on June 14, 2016; December 14, 2015; and December 6, 2015; President Obama said that the US goal is to destroy ISIL. ADRP 1-02 defines destroy as "A tactical task that physically renders an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted."¹⁰¹ Many believe that he really means to defeat ISIL, as GEN Jack Keane articulated during his Congressional testimony on September 29, 2015.¹⁰² In contrast, ADRP 1-02 defines defeat as "A tactical mission task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight. The defeated force's commander is unwilling or unable to pursue his adopted course of action, thereby yielding to the friendly commander's will, and can no longer interfere to a significant degree with the actions of friendly

¹⁰⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: The Administration's Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Updated FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request" (November 7, 2014), accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/07>.

¹⁰¹ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2012), 1-02.

¹⁰² John Keane, "A Flawed Strategy That Will Not Defeat ISIS," *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (October 1, 2015): 77, congressional testimony, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1721190276?accountid=28992>.

forces.”¹⁰³ Given the resources allocated and the operational environment in both Syria and Iraq, defeat may be more feasible, unless there is appetite from any appreciable segment of the U.S. government for large formations of ground forces to remain in theater for many years.

Ways to Achieve That Endstate

The 2014 whitehouse.gov fact sheet lays out the ways the United States is using to achieve this endstate. The FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request and the March 31, 2015 Inspector General (IG) Quarterly Report to the US Congress reiterate them. The United States and coalition forces will use nine lines of effort (LOEs).¹⁰⁴ LOE 1 (Supporting effective governance in Iraq) is the political support that the United States gives to the Haider al-Abadi government in Iraq in support of all Iraqis through “Functioning Federalism.”¹⁰⁵ Along LOE 2 (Deny ISIL safe-haven), US and coalition forces conduct airstrikes and provide support to Iraqi ground forces. The military supplies airpower to a credible ground partner in order to degrade and eventually defeat ISIL. A supporting effort is to “build a partner” in Syria.¹⁰⁶ The only credible partners in Syria thus far have the Syrian moderate opposition in the south and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) manned by the YPG (Yekineyen Parastina Gel or People’s Protection Units) in the north.¹⁰⁷ Both present considerable risks for the coalition.

LOE 3 (Build partner capacity) is the train, advise, and assist (TAA) and security force assistance (SFA) to train twelve brigades: nine Iraqi Security Force (ISF) Brigades and three

¹⁰³ ADRP 1-02, 1-12.

¹⁰⁴ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

¹⁰⁵ United States Secretary of Defense Inspector General, Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Quarterly Report and Biannual Report to the United States Congress 17, 2014-March 31, 2015* (April 2015), 22.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 26.

¹⁰⁷ Jocelyn Thomas, “The War in Syria: Five Vital Factors,” *Hampton Roads International Security Quarterly* (October 1, 2015): 19, congressional testimony, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1721190366?pg-origsite=summon>.

Peshmerga Kurd Brigades.¹⁰⁸ The most credible force has been the Iraqi Counterterrorism Force trained by US Special Forces over the past ten years.¹⁰⁹ The key aspects of this are providing weapons, ammunition, and TAA; helping the Iraqi National Guard to secure their communities; gaining Congressional authorities to train and assist Syrian rebels to push back ISIL and the Assad regime; and establishing a framework for partner country support.

LOE 4 (Enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL) represents all of the coalition's continuing efforts to understand the enemy better.¹¹⁰ LOE 5 (Disrupting ISIL's finances) is a coalition effort along with the Department of Justice, the Department of the Treasury, and the Counter-ISIL Finance Group (CIFG).¹¹¹ Their goals are to reduce ISIL's revenue from oil and other stolen assets; limit ISIL's ability to extort local populations; stem ISIL's gains from kidnapping, ransom, and external donations; and prevent ISIL from accessing financial systems. LOE 6 (Exposing ISIL's true nature) is an effort in coordination with clerics around the world well versed in Islam to show that ISIL is not truly Islamic.¹¹²

The coalition aims to accomplish LOE 7 (Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters) into and out of the Levant by working with eighty countries around the world. These countries will help prevent fighters from going to Syria, and more importantly, returning home to wage jihad. Another goal of this LOE is to mitigate the conditions that radicalize potential jihadists in the first place.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Thomas, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Loveday Morris, "The Force Leading the Iraq Army's Fight Against ISIS Went From 'Dirty Division' to Golden Boys" *Washington Post* (July 26, 2016) accessed December 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-force-leading-the-iraqi-militarys.

¹¹⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

¹¹¹ United States Secretary of Defense Inspector General, 31.

¹¹² The White House, Office of the Press Secretary.

¹¹³ United States Secretary of Defense Inspector General, 35.

LOE 8 (Protecting the homeland) is a combination of criminal laws, aviation security, and counter-narrative at home to combat violent extremism.¹¹⁴ LOE 9 (Humanitarian support) provides assistance to displaced persons and persons in poorly-governed regions susceptible to radicalization. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) leads a coalition to eliminate the root causes of ISIL's appeal. As of April 2015, the United States had provided \$777.55 million for humanitarian assistance for Syrians.¹¹⁵

Although all nine LOEs are important to the US Government, President Obama emphasized LOE 2 (Deny ISIL safe-haven) over the others in three recent speeches. During his speeches on December 6, 2015; December 14, 2015; and June 14, 2016, he emphasized the military actions that the United States has taken against ISIL's military capabilities. He dedicated over half of his December 6, 2015¹¹⁶ and June 14, 2016 speeches¹¹⁷ to this LOE and all of his December 14, 2015 speech.¹¹⁸

Next in priority during these three speeches were LOE 1 (Supporting effective governance in Iraq), LOE 3 (Build partner capacity), LOE 5 (Disrupting ISIL's finances), and LOE 7 (Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters). President Obama emphasized LOE 1 in his June 14, 2016 speech by saying, "Even as we continue to destroy ISIL militarily, we're addressing the larger forces that have allowed these terrorists to gain traction in parts of the world. With regard to Iraq, this means helping Iraqis stabilize liberated communities and promote inclusive governance so ISIL

¹¹⁴ United States Secretary of Defense Inspector General, 35.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 40.

¹¹⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Address to the Nation by the President" (December 6, 2015), accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>.

¹¹⁷ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President After Counter-ISIL Meeting" (June 14, 2016), accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/remarks-president-after-counter-ISIL-meeting>.

¹¹⁸ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on the Military Campaign to Destroy ISIL" (December 14, 2015), accessed October 26, 2016, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/04/remarks-president-military-campaign>.

cannot return.”¹¹⁹ He emphasized LOE 3 in his December 6, 2015 speech by saying, “We will continue to provide training and equipment to tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian forces fighting ISIL on the ground so that we take away their safe havens.”¹²⁰ In President Obama’s June 14, 2016 speech, he said, “Cutting off ISIL’s money may not be as dramatic as military strikes, but it is critically important,” to emphasize LOE 5.¹²¹ Finally, he emphasized LOE 7 in his June 14, 2016 speech by saying that, “Thanks to international efforts, the flow of foreign fighters – including from America to Syria and Iraq – has plummeted. In fact, our intelligence community now assesses that the ranks of ISIL fighters have been reduced to the lowest levels in more than two and a half years.”¹²²

Means to Conduct This Strategy

This strategy is truly a whole-of-government collaborative effort between the Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State (DoS), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Department of Justice (DoJ), Department of the Treasury (DoT), FBI, Director of National Intelligence (DNI), and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).¹²³ This is a 62-country coalition that initially had GEN (Ret.) John Allen serving as special envoy to Iraq to build coalition capacity and cohesion.¹²⁴ The Appropriations Act of 2015 provided \$5.0 billion to DoD airstrikes and TAA, \$520 million to DoS for regional stability and limited USAID humanitarian assistance.

¹¹⁹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President After Counter-ISIL Meeting.”

¹²⁰ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Address to the Nation by the President.”

¹²¹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President After Counter-ISIL Meeting.”

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ United States Department of Defense Inspector General, 3.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 11.

The FY2016 bill had \$5.3 billion for DoD and \$3.5 billion for DoS/USAID.¹²⁵ Coalition advisers have now trained more than 13,500 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) (4,000 Army Soldiers, 1,500 Counterterrorism Service Soldiers, 6,000 Peshmerga, 1,000 National Police, and 300 guards). They have also trained 5,000 local police and 20,000 tribal fighters.¹²⁶

Evaluation of U.S. Strategy vs. ISIL's Critical Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

For the most part, this strategy does an adequate job of addressing ISIL's military, political, and economic capabilities but not as well in addressing their ideological capabilities. The coalition seems committed to defeating ISIL's military forces, although there are still some shortcomings. Coalition forces have pushed ISIL out of Ramadi and are currently pushing them out of Mosul. Within the next few months, they will likely cease to exist as a state-like organization in Iraq. By August 2015, still very early in the coalition operation, airstrikes had already destroyed 119 tanks, 340 HMMWVs, 510 staging areas, 3,262 buildings, 2,577 fighting positions, and 196 pieces of oil infrastructure.¹²⁷ International finance efforts have cut their financial assets to a small percentage of what they were two years ago. This will have a dramatic effect on their ability to wage war, conduct acts of terror, or build their "utopian state." These results are predictable since they are the areas that the United States government has focused on. They are both what it has spent the majority of money on and what President Obama emphasized in his speeches.

Although the coalition is making considerable advances, there are issues in the military campaign. The ISF still needs considerable work, both in conventional and counterinsurgency

¹²⁵ United States Department of Defense Inspector General, 3.

¹²⁶ United States Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lieutenant General Sean McFarland, Commander, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve," via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq (April 10, 2016), accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/news/transcripts/transcript-view/article/911009/departments-of-defense>.

¹²⁷ Cordesman, 44.

capabilities, before they will be able to fight completely independently.¹²⁸ The coalition also has no credible partner at all in Syria. The SDF has done outstanding work in northern Syria but supporting them long-term will require a significant diplomatic effort with Turkey. Their YPG foundation makes the Turks see them as a Kurdish insurgent group.¹²⁹ Moderate Syrian opposition forces in southern Syria have been intermittently reliable but the Assad regime has all but destroyed them.¹³⁰ The coalition must have a long-term reliable partner before they have any hope of completely defeating ISIL.¹³¹

Most of the significant deficiencies with this strategy are its inability to address ISIL's ideological capabilities. There is no answer, or even clear understanding, of ISIL's and other Islamic extremists' root grievances. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the apparent arbitrary border drawing, the Islamic people feel that they lost their voice in the world.¹³² Major General Michael Nagata said, "We cannot defeat the idea. We do not even understand the idea."¹³³ Although senior leaders acknowledge this shortfall, which ISIL mentions in every issue of *Dabiq* magazine, the current US strategy does not address it.

Another ideological shortfall of this strategy is the United States' and coalition's inability to make any progress along LOE 8 (Exposing ISIL's true nature). Secretary of State John Kerry has described ISIL as, "A military cult masquerading as a religious movement."¹³⁴ The problem is that

¹²⁸ Benjamin.

¹²⁹ Hannah Lucinda Smith, "Victorious Turkish Forces Dig in After Syrian Breakthrough" *The Times [London (UK)]* (August 27, 2016): 36.

¹³⁰ Steve Herman, "Syria Cease-fire Deal Greeted With Support, Skepticism" *Voice of America* (September 11, 2016), accessed December 15, 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1818440115?pg-origsite=summon>.

¹³¹ Cockburn, 34.

¹³² Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Books, 2004), 183.

¹³³ Wood, 2.

¹³⁴ Kerry.

ISIL is very Islamic and US attempts to show that it is not are doomed to failure.¹³⁵ Baghdadi has a PhD in Islamic Studies and does an excellent job of explaining which verses in the Quran authorize and even direct all of their actions.¹³⁶ This makes it difficult and even disingenuous to refer to them as not Islamic. It makes the coalition look as if it does not understand the situation. Statements about banning Muslims from entering the country and specifically targeting Muslims for domestic surveillance are equally as unhelpful because they reinforce ISIL's message that this is a war between Western countries and all of Islam.

In addition to not understanding the movement or addressing ISIL's root complaints, any strategy is doomed to failure if there remains no alternative to ISIL in Syria. The Assad regime's atrocities and the national desperation are largely what led to the rise of ISIL in the first place. If a stable and Sunni inclusive regime does not rise in its place, there will always be ISIL, al Nusra, or something similar to fill the void.

One of the reasons why there is no alternative in Syria is that the United States and the coalition have not been able to find any common ground with Russia. Just reading a few issues of *Dabiq* magazine, it becomes clear that ISIL views the United States and Russia as almost the same government. Both sides need to realize this and work together to defeat this threat. LTG McFarland, former Commander of Coalition Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, said in his August 10, 2016 DoD briefing that Russia has become a significant player in Syria but they are causing a lot of problems, like bombing Arab resistance fighter camps in Southern Syria.¹³⁷ A common understanding between two prominent world powers and the ability to work together is essential for long-term strategic success.

¹³⁵ Wood, 6.

¹³⁶ Stern and Berger, 37.

¹³⁷ United States Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lieutenant General Sean McFarland, Commander, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve."

In Iraq, the Abadi government has done a much better job of incorporating Sunnis than the Maliki government but it still has to get better. When Abadi first became Prime Minister, the United States and its allies had a lot of optimism but then he bombed Fallujah for six out of seven days, killing twenty-eight civilians and wounding 118.¹³⁸ The situation has improved though. Abadi appointed both Sunni Arabs and Kurds to critical government positions, strengthening his legitimacy.¹³⁹ The Iraqi government still has a lot of work to do to fully incorporate Sunnis and make them feel like members of the team who actually want to fight ISIL.¹⁴⁰

The final non-military strategic shortfall is the United States' inability to enlist help from Iran and Saudi Arabia for this fight. As long as this remains a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, funding ISIL, and Iran, funding the Assad regime, this war will continue indefinitely. There has not been enough effort on the part of regional actors to actually stop this war. They see this mainly as an opportunity to further their Sunni or Shia ideologies.

Potential Negative Unintended Consequences

Providing aid, support, advisors, and equipment to various counter-ISIL forces could further the notion that the United States and its allies are building puppet governments in Iraq and Syria. To mitigate this, coalition forces must take all precautions to stay behind the scenes. Any gains made by coalition forces will last as long as coalition forces stay in theater. Gains made by host nation forces and governments will lay the long-term foundation for a lasting peace.

Another potential negative consequence is the requirement for the United States to work closely with Russia, Iran, and possibly the Assad regime in Syria. This will potentially require the

¹³⁸ Cockburn, 24.

¹³⁹ Kenneth Katzman, Christopher M. Blanchard, Clara E. Humud, Rhoda Margesson, and Alex Tiersky, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 5.

¹⁴⁰ Linda Robinson, *An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign: One Year After Mosul* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2015), 6.

United States to support a regime that has, and most likely will in the future, commit extreme human rights violations, as well as damage alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia. The United States needs to work hard, in coordination with the global community, to find a suitable alternative in Syria.

In addition to credibility issues, the patient indirect approach will most likely allow time for terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies as well as many murders, rapes, and other regional atrocities before ISIL finally burns itself out. The United States needs to focus on domestic law enforcement at home and pressure against ISIL in theater through all elements of national power. This will require domestic leadership and expectation management to prepare the people of the United States and other coalition nations for the timeframe required and strategic speed of the fight.

Collateral damage from coalition air-strikes or partner force ground operations will continue to fuel ISIL's message that coalition forces are only in theater to kill Muslims. Target discrimination and maximum partner force training and preparation prior to their participation in combat operations will be critical to mitigating these issues. There is always a trade-off between military effectiveness and collateral damage but discretion is acutely important in this fight, given ISIL's media savviness.

Another potential consequence is attempts to show ISIL's true nature (LOE 8) could backfire. They have been very upfront about their intentions and means. Any attempts to show that they are not Islamic could look foolish because the coalition lacks the expertise to challenge Baghdadi on Islamic knowledge. The United States should stay away from this discussion when possible and only use very credible Islamic spokesmen to make this claim when absolutely necessary.

Finally, putting too large a force in theater and making statements that could be misinterpreted as this being a war against Islam will play into ISIL propaganda. They already claim

that coalition forces are only in theater to destroy Islam. Actions or statements that help support that message can only help ISIL's cause. The United States and the coalition need to keep the footprint small and watch the rhetoric about whom this fight is against.

Alternatives Strategies to Defeat ISIL

Ways to Attack Critical Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

In addition to the lines of effort the United States and the coalition are already working on, they need to increase their efforts to combat ISIL's recruiting ability. The most important step to hurting ISIL's recruiting ability, and arguably the most difficult, will be developing effective regimes in both Iraq and Syria. Without effective regimes in those countries, there is no alternative to ISIL. If this fails, all of the other efforts to defeat ISIL will ultimately fail. The people need some government committed to making life better for them. Iraq must continue its trend of including more Sunnis in the government. Any perceived backslide could be disastrous. Syria needs an alternative that its citizens can believe in. Assad may be the answer but it needs to be a reformed Assad, coached by Russia and Iran at a minimum. This will require a significant diplomatic effort with the governments of Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Although this will likely be politically unpalatable for these countries, without it there is no hope for long-term success.

In addition to working with the governments in Iraq and Syria, the United States needs to do a better job of showing the atrocities that ISIL commits against Sunni Muslims.¹⁴¹ ISIL brags on social media about all of their atrocities against Shias, Christians, and Yazidis. They could lose legitimacy if people see their atrocities against fellow Sunni Muslims. Despite ISIL's claims that these victims are not real Muslims for various reasons, such as support to democratic governments, adherence to a justice system other than Sharia, or failure to wage jihad, the fact remains that they are wantonly killing practicing Sunni Muslims.

¹⁴¹ Stern and Berger, 251.

The United States also needs to publicly highlight ISIL's failures to properly govern their controlled territories. One of the critical capabilities that they have worked hard to showcase is the administrative skills that they have gotten from the Ba'athist converts. Decreased funding and their concentration on survival, especially in Iraq, have made their "utopian society" harder to obtain than they anticipated or advertised. Demonstrating that ISIL is not making people's lives any better than the governments of Iraq and Syria would significantly hurt their recruiting efforts.

In addition to counter-recruiting efforts, the United States and the coalition must continue and reinforce LOE 2 (Deny ISIL Safe-haven) and LOE 3 (Building Partner Capacity). The coalition must keep pressure on ISIL militarily through the Iraqi Security Force's ground operations and eventually a credible partner in Syria, supported by air attacks. This will keep ISIL from expanding and will damage their legitimacy. Failure to expand takes away their primary source of revenue. If they cannot expand and are forced to go underground, they also lose their claims of being a legitimate "State". The military pressure that the coalition is putting on them has already made it difficult to concentrate on the people and their utopian society. All indications point to this getting worse. Their critical capabilities of being able to seize and hold land and provide for the needs of the people will be effectively nullified. Their critical vulnerability of being an actual state is exacerbated by their inability to provide the services the people expect from a state, especially one that has promised those services so confidently.

To support their efforts at damaging ISIL's recruiting and state-like capabilities, the United States and the coalition need to continue to reinforce efforts to damage ISIL financing (LOE 5). International efforts to freeze their finances will significantly exacerbate their financial problems from lost internal revenue. This will then have an exponential effect on other critical capabilities and vulnerabilities. They will lose military capabilities which will make it even more difficult to hold land. That will make it even harder to provide the utopian society services that they have advertised. All of this will cause them to lose credibility in the eyes of the people.

The final and arguably the most important factor for the US attack on ISIL's critical capabilities and vulnerabilities is to be patient. ISIL is not an existential threat to the United States. Although they have cheered attacks against the United States and its allies, they have not actually financed any.¹⁴² Putting tens of thousands of soldiers into Iraq and Syria could quickly defeat ISIL militarily but it could also play right into their message that this is a crusade by the United States and coalition to kill Muslims.¹⁴³ After their defeat, ISIL will likely just go back to being an insurgent and terrorist group.¹⁴⁴ Defeating this group would require a lot of soldiers to stay for a very long time which could anger people in the Levant as well as people at home.¹⁴⁵ This is an ideology that has to burn itself out from the inside. People need to continue to see ISIL's atrocities and lack of improvements to the social and civic services that they have advertised. The world needs to be prepared for the fact that there is no quick solution; this will take a long time and many people will get killed in the meantime.¹⁴⁶

Strategies Used by Other Countries

Most of the strategies that countries have used in the past to combat terrorism have primarily concentrated on keeping terrorists from conducting attacks against their citizens. Destroying these terrorist groups has not always been possible but if they cannot attack their primary targets, they will eventually lose relevancy and burn out. These strategies have mainly concentrated on LOE 4 (Intelligence collection), LOE 5 (Disrupting finances), LOE 7 (Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters), and LOE 8 (Protecting the homeland).

¹⁴² Wood, 35.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁴⁴ US Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lieutenant General Sean McFarland, Commander, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve."

¹⁴⁵ McCants, 157.

¹⁴⁶ Wood, 36.

The keys to counterterrorism in Europe have been enhancing the European Union (EU) police and judicial cooperation, suppressing terrorist funding, and strengthening EU border controls. They have also focused on United States and European Union information exchanges, police and judicial cooperation, and extradition.¹⁴⁷ These are very similar to United States' LOEs 4, 5, and 8. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, the Italians and Germans have made significant law enforcement efforts and have had very good results. For example, they have made it punishable by law to support any extremist organizations in any way.¹⁴⁸ In the 1980s, France instituted very stringent domestic surveillance and began keeping a database of potential targets.¹⁴⁹

As previously noted, this fight against ISIL, as with any counterterrorism fight, is primarily an ideological fight. Many have credited counter-communist ideology during the Cold War as a more proximate cause of the fall of communism than the military buildup.¹⁵⁰ The United States needs to do a better job of exposing ISIL atrocities against Sunni Muslims and their lack of governance.¹⁵¹

In *Democracy and Counterterrorism*, Robert Art and Louise Richardson summarized the study of counterterrorism in 13 countries, including Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Venezuela, Peru, Columbia, Israel, Turkey, Russia, India, Sri Lanka, and Japan with three main principals: political measures, legislative and judicial measures, and security measures.¹⁵² Transferring these themes to the current fight, political measures in this case, means continuing to

¹⁴⁷ Kristin Archick and Paul Gallis, *Europe and Counterterrorism* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), 8.

¹⁴⁸ Yonah Alexander, *Counterterrorism Strategies: Successes and Failures of Six Nations* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006), 198.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 196.

¹⁵⁰ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 263.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Robert J. Art and Louise Richardson, eds., *Democracy and Counterterrorism: Lessons From the Past* (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace Press, 2007), 16.

improve the legitimacy of the government of Iraq and developing a viable alternative in Syria (LOE 1). Legislative and judicial measures, in this case, means using domestic law enforcement to prevent ISIL from conducting attacks against the United States or its allies (LOE 8). Security measures, in this case, means defeating ISIL formations and support networks using intelligence driven operations (LOEs 2, 3, and 4).

Conclusion

The current strategy that the United States is employing against ISIL addresses most of their critical capabilities and vulnerabilities but there are still many holes that it does not account for. Ultimately, this plan could succeed because it will keep the pressure on ISIL and prevent it from spreading, finding new finance sources, and building its utopian society. The coalition is continuing to make steady progress in taking back terrain from ISIL in Iraq. These efforts are decreasing ISIL's credibility and taking away a major source of funding. As they continue to lose money and have to focus most of their intellectual energy on waging war, they will be unable to build the administrative services that they have advertised. This will further decrease their credibility and cause their followers to look for another option. This is why Syria desperately needs another option.

In the meantime, the United States' strategy still has many unresolved issues. There is no government in Syria that can or will provide for the people. Until there is one, ISIL or another similar group will always have a following. Trying to show that ISIL is not Islamic is doomed to failure. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has a PhD in Islamic studies and does an excellent job of showing how inherently Islamic ISIL's actions really are. Trying to prove that ISIL is not Islamic ends up showing that the United States does not really understand the situation. Finally, efforts to stop the flow of terrorists from the United States and its allies into Syria could actually cause more attacks at home because if followers are not able to wage jihad in Syria and Iraq they must resort to waging jihad at home.

This study recommends that the United States focus its efforts on LOE 1 (Supporting effective governance in Iraq), LOE 2 (Denying ISIL safe-haven), LOE 3 (Building partner capacity), LOE 4 (Enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL), LOE 5 (Disrupting ISIL's finances), LOE 8 (Protecting the homeland), and LOE 9 (Humanitarian support) while downplaying LOE 6 (Exposing ISIL's true nature) and LOE 7 (Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters). The United States needs to expand LOE 1 to supporting effective governance in Syria. Whether they do that unilaterally or in cooperation with Russia and Iran - they must do it. Denying ISIL safe-haven, building partner capacity, enhancing intelligence collection on ISIL, and disrupting ISIL's finances will keep the pressure on them in the Middle East, keep them from territorial expansion, and prevent them from building a real "state." Efforts to protect the homeland and domestic law enforcement efforts should help limit attacks on the United States and its allies, although these efforts are never perfect though and more people will die before this is over. Efforts to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq and expose ISIL's true nature, aside from highlighting their atrocities against Sunni Muslims, have the potential to damage this campaign and result in more casualties both at home and in theater.

The next six months could see significant changes in the US strategy against ISIL but it is too early to know for sure. President Donald Trump has articulated that the United States will take a more aggressive stance against ISIL but still plans to primarily work through local security forces rather than through large formations of US ground forces. The administration is still working out the specifics of this strategy. National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James Mattis will both use their significant experience in this conflict to shape the emerging strategy.

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